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Key Player in Drug Trafficking Organization Sentenced

Man Sentenced to 13 Years in Prison for his Role in Trafficking Over 14 Tons of Marijuana into U.S. From Mexico

TUCSON, Ariz. - Jose Paul Gastellum-Chavez, aka Juan Chavez Rodriguez, 57, of Mexico, was sentenced to 13 years in prison by U. S. District Court Judge Frank R. Zapata.

The defendant was convicted of two counts of Conspiracy to Possess with the Intent to Distribute Marijuana and one count of Possession with the Intent to Distribute Marijuana. Gastellum-Chavez played a key role in a drug trafficking organization (DTO) responsible for transporting multi-ton quantities of marijuana from Mexico into the United States.

"For this organization, the defendant was a critical cog in the flow of drugs from Mexico throughout the United States. He enabled the DTO to gain access and distribute marijuana into the U.S. This sentencing represents a significant blow to the organization and sends a message to individuals working at all levels of these organization," said U.S. Attorney Dennis K. Burke. "I want to thank the federal agencies along with the Arizona Department of Public Safety and the South Tucson Police Department for their work in this investigation."

The DTO, utilizing tractor- trailers, brought multi-ton shipments of marijuana into the United States from Mexico via ports of entry located in Arizona. The shipments were then trans-loaded from the Mexican tractor-trailers to domestic tractor-trailers at various warehouses in Nogales and Rio Rico, Arizona, then driven to Tucson or Phoenix and eventually to cities throughout the United States. During the course of the investigation, law enforcement seized in excess of 28,000 pounds of marijuana.

"This sentencing sends a clear message to drug traffickers that their actions have serious consequences," said Doug Coleman, DEA Acting Special Agent in Charge. "DEA and our law enforcement partners are successfully striking back at drug traffickers who have chosen to use Arizona as a venue for their illegal drug trade. Our communities are benefitting today from our collaborative efforts, dedication and hard work."

The defendant's role in the DTO was to coordinate the shipment of the multi-ton marijuana loads once they arrived in the U.S. He would secure drivers, tractor-trailers, warehouses and workers to aid in trans-loading the marijuana and performing counter-surveillance. When a shipment of marijuana entered the U.S. from Mexico, the defendant reported the progress of the marijuana load directly to suppliers in Mexico.

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The defendant was one of twenty-two defendants indicted for their participation in the conspiracy. Eighteen defendants have resolved their cases through pleading guilty and have been sentenced or awaiting sentencing. Three defendants, Gregorio LOPEZ-Rodriguez, Jesus COTA-Ibarra, and Jose Pastor MENDEZ-Huerta, are fugitives believed to be in Mexico.

The investigation leading to the guilty verdict was conducted by the Drug Enforcement Administration, Customs and Border Protection, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, United States Border Patrol, Tucson Counter Narcotics Alliance, Arizona Department of Public Safety, and the South Tucson Police Department.

The prosecution was handled by James T. Lacey and Joseph W. Hanley, Assistant U.S. Attorneys, District of Arizona, Tucson.

CASE NUMBER: CR-08-1208-TUC-FRZ
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